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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify effective methods that select, junior high school, social studies teachers found useful in promoting the reading and studying of printed materials. In the course of the research, 78 teachers identified specific procedures they had used to increase seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students' effectiveness in studying social studies content. Respondents suggested that teachers should: (1) provide an introduction to the textbook early in the course; (2) make assignments clear and reasonable; (3) teach students any special vocabulary that the textbook used; (4) help students learn to read for the main ideas and identify the author's the author's organizational plans of reading materials; (5) encourage students to read widely on the assigned topic; (6) determine the reading level of students and of their reading assignments; (7) review research and evaluation skills with students; (8) assist students in appreciating past-present and cause-effect relationships; (9) instruct students in methods of evaluating what they read; and (10) use a directed reading approach early in the course. Junior high school students need help in developing higher level thinking skills. Social studies teachers are the keys to helping students develop the necessary critical thinking and reflective reasoning abilities. (LBG)

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TEACHING THE READING AND STUDY SKILLS NEEDED IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSES

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TEACHING THE READING AND STUDY SKILLS NEEDED IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSES

The major purpose of this study was to identify effective methods and procedures that selected junior high school social studies teachers had found to be very helpful in helping their students master the reading and study skills needed for understanding the textbooks and other printed materials used in their classes. These teachers were asked to suggest only specific procedures they had used to help students become more effective readers as the students were studying their social studies content in grades seven, eight and nine. The teachers who participated in this study were all in one of the grades listed above. These grades provided education designed primarily for exploratory education.

This researcher hypothesized that well-educated, experienced social studies teachers who had done graduate work in one of the social studies--15 hours or more--and who had also received advanced training in reading and study skills could suggest specific practices which would be worthy of consideration by other junior high school social studies teachers for use with their students.

Perspectives

Even today in the early nineties reading and study skills are usually taught only in the elementary school in most systems or in a special remedial or developmental reading class in a secondary school. Such instructional programs generally place

emphasis on the reading of narrative or simple factual material and are usually terminated at the end of the fourth or fifth grade.

Beyond the elementary school level, training in reading and study methods is mostly optional and dependent upon the individual teacher's recognition of his/her students' needs.[1] For that and other reasons there are many students in junior high school social studies classes who have had little, if any, instruction in the reading and study skills needed for effective learning in this content area of the curriculum.[2]

At the same time, many reading specialists have determined that at the seventh or eighth grade level, in a typical class where I.Q.'s often range from 85 to 130 and where the average age is 13 or 14, there will probably be four to six grade levels of reading ability represented in that class. Often the teacher is confronted with the challenge of teaching these students with only one textbook and a limited amount of reference material. Thus, since most learning in secondary school classes is through the use of textbooks, reading and study skills become the "common denominator" of learning in such classrooms.[3] Sanacore points out that many junior high school students have difficulty--not necessarily because they are unable to read, but because they do not have the reading and study skills essential for reading and learning effectively in the major content areas of the curriculum.[4]

This research report is a summary of a study conducted in the fall of 1991 by the author with the help of teachers in California, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina and Virginia. The study was limited to 78 social studies teachers who taught in junior high schools with enrollments of 500 or more students. Thirty-seven of the teachers were interviewed by the author himself. The others were interviewed in their schools or homes by three reading specialists who had taught social studies at least five years, had completed at least a master's degree and who had also completed a course in research procedures. All of the teachers studied had taught social studies in a junior high school at least three years. All had completed a master's degree and at least one graduate level course in reading. Twenty-two had a master's degree in history. The others had a combination of graduate work in social studies and education or education, reading and curriculum.

The procedures in this study involved the following: a review by the author of the recent research on reading and study skills needed in the content areas of the junior high school in general and extensive use of the ERIC system and the Education Index and interviews with the 78 teachers who met the criteria stated above and who were interested in taking part in the study and receiving the results of the study. A very short, carefully designed questionnaire was used in the interview.

Some Recent Studies

Since this study was concerned primarily with the methods and practices of the selected teachers being studied, only a brief summary of some of the more pertinent research on the topic of reading and study skills needed in junior high school social studies classes will be presented here; however, the author strongly recommends that any person who has an interest in this topic have a computer search of the literature made for one's self. It is the author's opinion that such a study will prove to be very rewarding.

As was mentioned above, in recent studies the point is made that in many school systems most students still experience only basal reading instruction. Often the instruction in elementary school training on how to read and study in the content areas is dependent upon the indivdual teacher's recognition of students' needs and the teacher's ability and willingness to meet those needs.[5] Today many educators state that the student's reading ability will ultimately be the crucial factor in one's success or failure in content classes such as social studies. Every teacher in every junior high school social studies class is dealing with materials the student must read and study. This means that the teacher will have many opportunities to help students who are reading the required printed materials in his/her course.[6]

In the past many junior high school teachers felt either unable to help students in the area of reading and study skills or that it was not their major responsibility. Fortunately, many now believe that they can and should help students with the

reading and study skills needed in their classes. Most still feel that although their primary responsibility is the teaching of content, it is also important to help with study skills so that the students can learn more effectively. In other words, instruction in reading and study skills has become an integral part of teaching.[7]

Rubin believes that even proficiency in general reading skills is not enough for success in junior high school social studies classes. She pointed out in her recent writings that students need to learn a specialized vocabulary and special study skills in each of the content areas.[8] Other reading specialists and experienced teachers who have had advanced study in reading assert that to teach content effectively, teachers must be aware of the varying needs and abilities of their students and provide instruction in the reading and study skills which are demanded by the social studies content.[9]

Shepherd states that with few exceptions the content teacher is the best qualified individual for giving reading and study skills instruction in junior high school social studies classes to both average and above average students.[10] He feels this is true because through the teacher's interest, preparation, and education, each is a specialist in his/her teaching field. It is usually the social studies teacher who has acquired the background in vocabulary, concepts, and generalizations which is necessary for intelligent instruction in social studies. The content teacher should be the most capable of helping students

learn to pronounce new words, to understand new concepts, to determine the crucial parts of material which require slow, thoughtful reading and those areas which need only skimming or rapid reading.

The major research studies dealing with the teaching of reading and study skills in social studies in secondary schools published during the past 15 years clearly set forth many promising strategies for improving the reading and study skills of students in these classes.[11] Most often mentioned in the research literature reviewed for this study and in the ERIC system are teaching students how to find, understand and retain the major ideas and supporting details in reading materials used; helping students master skills in locating, evaluating, and using information and making certain that materials are appropriate for the different reading levels; helping students build their vocabularies and teaching them to use plans such as the SQ3R method and teaching word analysis skills; and showing students how to use different parts of the textbook such as the preface, summaries, graphic aids, author's organization and the index. Research literature also brings out that teachers should emphasize the understanding and retention of ideas and concepts encountered when reading by setting definite purposes for reading; for example, to evaluate a particular issue or to determine the general significance of an article.

Other suggestions include taking time to help students acquire an understanding of concepts of time and space, the chronology of eras and events, the relationships between past and present, and cause-effect relationships; providing differentiated materials and assignments when necessary and grouping pupils for special help with reading and study skills if needed; use of charts, tables, graphs, maps, globes, and other pictorial or graphic presentations for aid in acquiring an understanding of basic concepts and major themes; helping students learn to discriminate between fact and opinion, to choose valid conclusions, and to make sound inferences and generalizations. Lastly, teachers should show students how to weigh the reliability of different statements, make comparisons and contrasts, and put an idea in one's own words without changing the meaning of the printed material. They must also train their students to deal with lengthy compound-complex sentences often found in textbooks whose paragraphs are packed with concepts. These are the most often discussed practices for helping students in junior high school with their reading and study skills set forth in educational literature, according to this researcher's analysis.

Analysis of Interview Data

The most important part of this study was the interviews with the 78 social studies teachers. During the course of the interviews the teachers were asked to complete a short questionnaire. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was provided for those who wanted to complete the questionnaire at home. The analysis of data given below is based on the responses of the

experienced teachers to two of the questions on the questionnaire. The first of these two questions was, "Do you feel that it is the responsibility of a junior high school social studies teacher to teach students special reading and study skills in the classroom if it is evident that students need such skills?" Seventy-one of the experienced social studies teachers answered yes to this question. None said no to the question, but seven put limitations on their responses which indicated some ambivalence on their part. In essence, they were concerned over how much time and effort they could give to reading and study skills since, in their words, they "had to teach so much material on content in social studies."

The second question was, "Would you please take a few minutes and state on the blank pages attached to this questionnaire the most effective methods you believe that junior high school social studies teachers can use to teach the special reading and study skills needed in their classes?" The teachers were asked to list at least four promising methods or procedures, but not to list more than eight. The ten methods or approaches most often stated by these experienced teachers are given below. The exact wording of each response was carefully studied, classified, and then summarized into a statement which would convey the meaning of the various responses even though the verbatim wording of each teacher's statements could not be given here. Three reading specialists helped the author classify and summarize the responses. Number one was listed the greatest

number of times; number two was the next most often stated on through number ten below. The results were as follows:

1. Early in the school year take time to introduce the textbook and provide knowledge of and practice in using the different parts of the book effectively.

2. Make assignments very clear and reasonable in length and difficulty. Try to get as much reading and study--homework--assignments done in class as possible. (This was considered to be crucial for the average and below average student.)

3. Help students learn the special vocabulary and terminology used in social studies textbooks and reading materials. Explain the vocabulary and concepts introduced in new chapters, units and supplementary reading materials.

4. Help students learn to read for the main ideas in social studies materials, supporting details, different points of view, and to identify the author's organizational plans.

5. Encourage students to read widely on major topics you teach. Help them become efficient in critical or evaluative reading by providing practice in identifying bias, prejudice, and propaganda techniques.

6. Determine the reading level of your students and of the textbook and other printed materials you are using. Provide plenty of materials for students who read below grade level and for those who read on and above grade level. Do not let the textbook be the only source of reading materials used in your social studies class.

7. Teach students the skills needed in locating, using, and evaluating information and materials used to answer questions or to solve research problems in social studies.

8. Help students acquire an understanding of the relationships between past and present and cause-effect relationships in social studies materials and textbooks.

9. Teach students to evaluate what they read, to differentiate between factual and editorial writing, and to identify false generalizations and distortions of truth in printed materials.

10. Use a directed reading approach in many of your lessons during the first two or three months of the year. Teach students how to use a study guide. Emphasize the understanding and retention of ideas and concepts found in the textbook and other printed materials used in social studies. Teach them to read for definite purposes such as to answer questions, be prepared for tests, locate information, summarize materials, evaluate points of view and to be able to grasp the general significance of printed materials. Teach the importance of concentration and the importance of having a definite study plan.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recent literature on teaching reading and study skills needed in junior high school social studies classes and the results of the 78 interviews in this study seem to verify several conclusions. Junior high social studies teachers have responsibilities in the area of reading and study skills; special study

and reading skills in junior high school social studies classes must be an area of concern for teachers in this subject who are striving for effective teaching and learning.

The data secured from the interviews indicated that the most effective ways for helping students learn the special reading and study skills needed in junior high social studies classes were essentially the following: (1) help students set definite purposes for reading and studying textbooks and other materials; (2) help students master special vocabulary, social science terminology and concepts; (3) provide a variety of reading materials which are appropriate for social studies classes and the students' reading levels; (4) teach students how to find and retain the main ideas of a selection and the relevant details; (5) use supervised study and teach students how to use their textbooks and reference materials effectively; (6) help students learn to read social studies materials critically and evaluatively; (7) show students how to use pictorial and graphic aids and materials provided by the author; (8) use technology and media to reinforce learning, to promote retention, and to build concepts in social studies; (9) teach students the skills needed in locating, using and evaluating information and materials used to answer questions or to solve research questions in social studies; and (10) encourage students to practice study procedures. Try to get students to see that reading is an excellent way they can learn to secure a concrete basis for creative, conceptual thinking and learning.

Social studies teachers can use a directed reading approach to help students recognize propaganda techniques and how such techniques are used. They can use political cartoons to help students practice critical thinking. Teachers can help students understand how connotative meanings are important in recognizing writers' biases. Some teachers are now using computers to help teach many of these skills in social studies classes and to help individualize instruction in their content classes. Junior high students need help in developing higher level thinking skills in social studies classes. Social studies teachers are key persons to help students develop needed skills in critical thinking and reflective reasoning.

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